

# How to Serve Your Initial Court Documents

King County Family Law Facilitators: Instruction 6.1  
Superior Court Civil Rule 4 and Revised Code of Washington 4.28.080-110

*Service of the initial court documents (the documents with which legal actions are commenced; typically the **Summons**, or **Summons and Petition**, in a family law action) is a critical part of the legal action. Service is required to give the opposing party notice that you have filed a legal action and to give the opposing party an opportunity to respond. Unless the opposing party has joined in your petition by either signing and filing a Joinder form, or signing the Joinder section of the Petition, you must file the appropriate document with the Court Clerk proving that the opposing party was served. **Failure to provide valid proof of service or joinder will prevent you from finalizing your court action.** If the opposing party has joined in your petition, you do not need to serve him or her with “process”.*

Service by means other than those described in these instructions may be required or allowed for commencement of certain actions (for instance, actions for modification of child support). Please refer to instructions for the type of action you are commencing, or consult with an attorney, for further information on any special provisions regarding service relating specifically to that type of action.

<b>PERSONAL SERVICE</b>
-------------------------

**FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS BELOW FOR THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH APPLY TO YOUR PARTICULAR SITUATION**

1. **If the opposing party will agree to accept the papers directly from you (and there is not a restraining order in effect restricting your contact with the opposing party):** Service of process by one party to the action directly on another party to the action (for instance, by the Petitioner on the Respondent) is **not valid** unless the party being served agrees, **and** signs an **“Service Accepted” (FL All Family 117)**.

On the “Service Accepted” form you should fill in the case caption (names of the petitioner and opposing party, upper left of form) and case number (next to “NO.”, upper right of form), and in Paragraph 1 check the boxes and complete as appropriate, indicating by complete title **all** documents the opposing party is accepting service of. The opposing party should complete Paragraph 2 if he or she wishes. They **must sign, print their name** and fill in the date signed. They should also print their name and fill in his or her address, where indicated. You should then make a copy of the original,

signed, Service Accepted and file the original with the Court Clerk, retaining the copy for your records.

2. **If the opposing party will not accept service of the papers as set forth above:** You must arrange for **someone besides yourself**, over the age of 18, to serve the documents on the opposing party. **You cannot serve the documents yourself.** The King County Sheriff's Office will serve the opposing party for a fee. The Sheriff's Office can also serve documents on the opposing party if he or she is in jail. If the opposing party lives outside King County, you can call the sheriff's office in the county in which the opposing party resides. You can also look in the yellow pages under "Process Servers." These process servers will also charge a fee. Another option is to have a friend or family member, over the age of 18, serve the opposing party (as long as the Server is not a party to the action). The papers should be handed by the Server to the opposing party **wherever the opposing party can be found**. If the Server goes to the opposing party's home (usual residence) and the opposing party is not there, the papers may be left with any other person of **"suitable age and discretion"** (someone who is old enough and mentally able to understand that they are receiving legal papers, and who will be likely to give them to the opposing party; usually must be at least a teenager) **who resides at the opposing party's usual residence**. If possible, the Server should get the name, and/or make note of a description, of the person with whom he or she is leaving the documents, in the event a dispute arises as to whether proper service was made.

To prove that proper service was made, the Server must sign a **"Proof of Personal Service" (FL All Family 101)**. If you have the papers served by the Sheriff or a professional process Server, they will typically complete and sign their own Return of Service or Affidavit of Service form, and either file the original, or provide it to you for filing.

If you have a friend or relative serve the papers, you will need to provide the Proof of Personal Service form. On the Proof of Personal Service form, you should fill in the case caption (names of the petitioner and opposing party, upper left of form) and case number (next to "NO.", upper right of form).

In Paragraph 2, fill in the name of the opposing party, and the Server must indicate whether the documents were given directly to the other party or whether they were given to someone else of suitable age and discretion who lives at the same address as the party. If they were given to someone else, that person's name should be indicated.

In Paragraph 3, the Server must indicate the date of service, the time of service, and the actual address where the documents were served.

In Paragraph 4 list the titles of **all** documents served on the opposing party by checking the appropriate boxes by listed forms, and writing in the titles of any of the forms which were served, but are not listed.

In Paragraph 6 the server must indicate the place (city and state) and date the Server is signing the Return of Service, and sign and print their name, where indicated.

You should then make a copy of the original, signed, Return of Service, and file the original with the Court Clerk, retaining the copy for your records.

If personal service is made outside the state of Washington, the server must complete the section on the last page of the document. The server must have that section notarized and have a seal attached, or before a clerk of a court of record.

Additionally you must also file a **“Declaration: Personal Service Could Not Be Made In Washington” (FL All Family 102)**, explaining why personal service cannot be made in-state. Failure to file this form invalidates service. File the original with the Clerk and keep a copy for your records.

#### **SERVICE BY MAIL OR PUBLICATION**

**You cannot obtain valid service by mail or publication without first obtaining a Court Order authorizing service by mail, and the requirements for service by mail or publication must be strictly followed. You cannot mail the documents to the opposing party yourself. For detailed instructions on how to have the opposing party served by mail or by publication ask the facilitator for those instructions.** You can ask the Court permission to have the opposing party served by mail or publication on the same day you file your other documents with the Clerk's office.

If you do not know where the opposing party lives, the law requires you to make an honest, diligent and reasonable effort to locate the opposing party. **You must describe in detail what efforts you made to find the person in your request to the Court. Such efforts may include checking a phone book or reverse directory where the person last stayed, calling directory assistance, checking internet resources and talking with the opposing party's friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and employers. You should provide the Court with the names of the people you talk to. You may also ask the post office to do a postal trace.**

If you cannot find the opposing party, but know the address of a relative or friend that the opposing party sees regularly, the Court may give you permission to have the documents mailed (**by someone other than yourself**) to the opposing party at the relative's or friend's address and/or at the opposing party's last known address.

The Court may also give you permission to have the opposing party served by mail if the opposing party lives out of state or if you cannot afford to have him or her served in person. In order to obtain permission to have the opposing party served by mail, the service must be just as likely to notify the opposing party as service by publication would. Please note that service by publication can be very expensive.

**WARNING:** These instructions are not a substitute for legal advice. The laws and court rules are complex and following these instructions will not guarantee you a favorable result. It is always advisable to talk to a lawyer about your problem before filing your action. (You may be able to hire a lawyer for a small fee to review your completed forms and talk about your problem but not represent you in court). If you need a lawyer, contact the Family Law Facilitators' Office for their *Legal Resource List* or call the King County Bar Association.